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ABSTRACT

The career of Robert Maynard Hutchins and his 1936 book, "The Higher Learning in America," which addressed the college liberal arts curriculum, are discussed. Hutchins was a controversial university president in the 1930s and 1940s. He is normally remembered as an Aristotelian and a champion of civil liberties, the Great Books, and adult education. Hutchins's undergraduate work was done at Oberlin College and Yale University, and he received his law degree from Yale. He served as a lecturer and dean of the Yale Law School and was a successful fund raiser in a number of posts. He was an administrator at age 21 and at age 30 he became president of the University of Chicago, where he had a 22-year tenure. During Hutchin's second career, he served at the Ford Foundation's Fund for the Republic, which was devoted to the study of American freedom and civil liberties. He was the founder of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions at Santa Barbara. His book, "The Higher Learning in America," advocated that college learning should be pervasively intellectual rather than a means to develop character or prepare for a vocation. Other ideas expressed in the book and contemporary critical reviews are considered. (SW)

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REVISITING HUTCHINS AND THE HIGHER LEARNING IN AMERICA

Benjamin McArthur

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REVISITING HUTCHINS AND THE HIGHER LEARNING IN AMERICA

When William James spoke of the buzzing, blooming confusion of life he referred not to education--but he might as well have. For if any subject has remained the sport of philosophers and cranks and sober commissions it is education. This companion and helpmate of democracy never escapes the arena of debate; it offers itself always ready to be reformed yet again. To the same degree that Americans are never content with themselves or their society they are ever willing to remake the next generation through a remodeled curriculum.

We find ourselves again preoccupied with the nation's learning, concern being meted out in equal part to secondary and higher education. The future of America probably hinges more critically on our high schools. I will linger, however, among the groves of academia. In particular I wish to return attention to an educator who in his lifetime never needed help in attracting notice: Robert Maynard Hutchins. No man abhorred the confusion afflicting education more than Hutchins, and no individual dedicated himself so completely to its removal. He defined the problem and proposed his solution in his most famous book, The Higher Learning in America.. The fiftieth anniversary of this 1936 publication, falling among many calls for the kind of curricular reform Hutchins would have encouraged, provides the right moment to try to recapture the excitement the book and its author generated. If The Higher Learning in America now reads in some respects as an artifact of 1930's intellectual history, it nonetheless remains our most eloquent plea for an untarnished liberal arts curriculum.

I

Considering his prominence as administrator and public figure for five decades Robert Hutchins's place in both educational history and American

intellectual history is remarkably unsettled. His lasting contribution has yet to be defined, and in some quarters remains the suspicion that there was more fury than substance to the man. Today one probably thinks of Hutchins first as the controversial university president of the 1930's and 1940's, and second as the founder of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions. He is normally remembered as an Aristotelian, an ardent champion of civil liberties, the Great Books, adult education, and as a wide-ranging intellectual whose caustic one-liners made him among the country's most quotable men. These generalizations are accurate; still, his career bears a quick recounting, for his is one of the remarkable lives of American education.

Robert Maynard Hutchins came by his evangelical reformism honestly, born in 1899 the son of a Presbyterian minister who would teach theology at Oberlin in Robert's youth and later be president of that progressive institution in Kentucky, Berea College. World War I interrupted college at Oberlin, and when he returned stateside he completed his undergraduate work at Yale in 1921. Hutchins moved from one conquest to another in the intellectual circles of Yale. Like his father before him, the younger Hutchins captured the DeForest Prize for oratory. He graduated with honors and won election to Wolf's Head and Phi Beta Kappa. But it was his eloquence teamed with an unbridled frankness that first made his reputation as the enfant terrible of American education. At an alumni dinner his senior year attended by Yale's notables of past and present, Hutchins delivered an address in his characteristically blunt manner cataloguing the school's failures. He offended some of the old guard; but he impressed others, including president-elect James Rowland Angell.(1) After a brief stint of secondary teaching Hutchins was called by Angell back to New Haven as secretary of the Yale Corporation.

An important university administrator at age 21, the regimen of

committees and fund raising could not consume the energies of one who rivaled Ben Franklin in his loathing of idleness. He took law courses on the side, receiving his L.L.B. in 1925. Hutchins was appointed lecturer in public service law and trade regulation upon graduation, the areas where he made his contribution in a brief career of scholarship. Administration beckoned again in 1927. He became the compromise candidate for acting--and the next year permanent--dean of Yale Law School in 1927. Hutchins arrived at the moment when Yale sought its own answer to the preeminence of Harvard Law School. Consequently, senior professors were willing to support the radical changes their precocious dean proposed, which were many--including the raising of entrance standards, introducing honors courses and independent studies, and realigning the whole curriculum.(2) Hutchins's law school reforms centered on attempts to make it a bastion of legal realism. Together with Milton Winternitz, dean of the medical school, he organized the Institute of Human Relations, where the analytical tools of the various social sciences could illumine the study of law. In retrospect the Institute, with its prevailing empiricism and social utilitarianism, seems a strange prelude to Hutchins's later pronouncements on education. The future champion of scholasticism was well veiled as legal realist. Yet in other respects Hutchins's law school years anticipate important themes of his presidency: a desire to bring the professional school studies closer to those of the academic departments, an interdisciplinary spirit seeking the unity of all knowledge, and perhaps above all, a regret at the absence of a community of scholars, the single most important theme of his career. (3)

Hutchins again displayed his Midas touch at fund raising by enticing a munificent start-up grant from the Rockefeller Foundation for the Institute. But he would not be around to nurture his brain child. In the spring of 1929 he received and accepted an offer to become the fifth president of the

University of Chicago. How did it happen that an impetuous thirty-year old would be named to head what some feel was then the finest research university in America? Robert Hutchins was not the search committee's first choice. His extraordinary talents, associates felt, needed seasoning. "His enthusiasm and perspective are not yet disciplined or matured by sufficient experience," advised Angell.(4) Yet as other candidates fell by the wayside Hutchins's name reemerged, bolstered by the endorsement of several foundation heads regarding his skills at bringing in funds. The search committee, more importantly, fell under the spell of Hutchins's inordinate charm. The youth of this Lochinvar now appeared a virtue; the choice of president became a re-creation of the University's founding by another prodigy from Yale, William Rainey Harper.

Hutchins's inauguration in the fall of 1929 began an eventful if contentious twenty-two year tenure. He inherited a university already engaged in self-scrutiny. The curricular reforms of the 1930's, as is often pointed out, owed much to faculty and administrative plans pre-dating Hutchins's arrival. But to these the new president added enthusiasm and a sense of urgency. His conversion to the gospel of liberal arts learning, preached to him by Mortimer Adler, affected (infected, critics might say) nearly every dealing with the faculty. While agreement existed that the college, that "unwanted, ill-begotten brat," should be strengthened, fundamental differences appeared over the animating philosophy of the change. The entrenched graduate divisions viewed the college as preliminary training grounds for specialists. Hutchins and the other college reformers saw it as having an integrity of its own, the domain of general education rather than specialization. Through the thirties and forties these differences inspired the "Chicago fights," which intermittently lit up the landscape of American education.(5)

Tracing the Byzantine course of curricular reform in these years need not

occupy space here. Suffice it to note that the "Hutchins College" never existed, at least in the form he desired of a liberal arts curriculum based on the Great Books. The nearest approximation came with the 1942 reform creating an integrated four-year program devoted to general education. Richard McKeon, Joseph Schwab, and Clarence Faust among others were more responsible for the details of the program than Hutchins. His contribution always resided more in the encouragement of change and support of his faculty allies than in nuts and bolts planning. Like most visionaries Hutchins functioned best as conceptualizer and exhorter rather than as technician.

The controversies that swirled about Hutchins reached beyond the internecine fights with the faculty. On two occasions he had to defend the University against charges of "subversive activities." The first, in 1935, was occasioned by complaints of drugstore magnate Charles Walgreen that his niece was taught radicalism in her college classes. Not only did the Illinois Legislature exonerate the school, but Hutchins and his able publicist William Benton talked Walgreen into a half-million dollar bequest. A second investigation in 1949 partook of the Cold War anxieties about internal subversion. This prelude to McCarthyism matched Hutchins at his acerb best against the investigating Broyles Commission of the Illinois Legislature. Once again Chicago was judged sound, and Hutchins added to his reputation as a leading defender of academic freedom.(6)

Hutchins also stirred debate (and possibly lost some esteem) by his adamant opposition to U. S. entry in World War II. As in most of his stands on public issues, he staunchly adhered to what he considered the morally and philosophically correct position; compromise or expediency were always repulsive notions to one who was in the truest sense a moralist. After the war Hutchins just as firmly embraced internationalism. The man who pledged the University's support for the Manhattan Project led the drive for a world

constitution to control the Project's ultimate, awful creation. If Hutchins's Wilsonianism was apt, for if their was another person whose career appeared to be a model for his it was Woodrow Wilson. As champion of a rigorous humanities curriculum at Princeton Wilson's idea of what should constitute a college education resembled Hutchins's. Moreover, many of Hutchins's contemporaries felt it was just a matter of time before he would follow the path of Princeton's scholar-statesman into public service. It would not be. Though rumors flew about during the halcyon days of the New Deal that FDR had pegged Hutchins for the Supreme Court or to head the Securities and Exchange Commission, neither job materialized. He was too much the maverick, too outspoken even in his criticism of the Democratic Party. Hutchins always performed best as the detached critic of society's institutions.

How, then, did Robert Hutchins survive twenty-two years in a job that normally places a premium on sedateness? To be sure, University board members occasionally bristled at his thoughtless jabs directed at the business world and grew weary at what seemed an extreme defense of academic freedom. That Hutchins concluded the longest tenure of any University of Chicago president resided in several facts, all of them crucial. He had, first, the support of a devoted, even adoring board chairman: Harold Swift. Hyde Park's university, not the stockyards, was Swift's first love, and he saw in Hutchins a man whose talents were worth the price of some lost corporate gifts. Hutchins, for his part, commanded the public's attention, and the University became synonymous with educational innovation. Even the trustees, as one board member acknowledged later, were kept in a state of "healthy agitation." They respected Hutchins's intellectual powers--and his considerable skills at fund raising.(7) Finally, Huchins's longevity bespoke his administrative prowess. If he defied some of the axioms of administration he did so in the belief that leadership (and not mere officeholding) required it. The image of Hutchins as

independent iconoclast, prone to sarcasm and insult--an image cultivated by Hutchins's aides--should not obscure his organizational command.(8) Not the command, certainly, of a Harper or an Andrew Dickson White--faculty autonomy had become too well-intrenched for that--but a leadership that achieved substantial curricular reform nevertheless. Hutchins could persuade a reluctant board to endorse most of his ideas, whether it be holding firm on faculty salaries during the depression or taking ownership of the Encylopedia britannica.

Nevertheless, the years took their toll on Hutchins's enthusiasm for academic administration. After his 1944 attempt to strengthen presidential authority, University faculty rebelled. Hutchins had become to them a kind of "man on horseback," subverting faculty prerogatives in his determined pursuit of a unified learning. The Senate memorial to the University trustees signed by 120 full professors signalled the most serious faculty opposition Hutchins ever faced and required him to back down on some issues. From that point on Hutchins's attention moved increasingly from University affairs to his various commission memberships and chairmanship of Britannica. Wearied of carping faculty and the ceaseless solicitation of funds, the offer to be an associate director of the new Ford Foundation was irresistable. The spring of 1951 brought his final graduation commencement as presiding officer.

Hutchins's second career--at the the Ford Foundation, its Fund for the Republic, and the Fund's own creation, the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions--has been more thoroughly chronicled than his presidency and must occupy us but a moment here.(9) The Ford Foundation's championing of civil liberties ran directly into the buzz saw of McCarthyism in the early 1950's. Hutchins directed the Fund for the Republic, a Ford Foundation offspring devoted to the study of American freedom. Lavishly funded but increasingly distanced from its parent because of the attacks it engendered, the Fund for

the Republic nevertheless performed a yeoman's task through the decade in publishing bold studies of blacklisting, discrimination in housing, American Communism, and other controversial subjects. It further sponsored a plethora of pamphlets, advertisements, film clips, and group discussions extolling America's tradition of civil liberties. Robert Hutchins never left education, then, he simply moved to new venues of instruction. An exponent of adult education while still at Chicago (the Great Books of the Western World originated in an executive's Great Book discussion class he led in downtown Chicago), Hutchins made the Fund for the Republic a national school for citizenship.

As the nation recovered from the fever of McCarthyism and threats to civil liberties seemed less imminent, Hutchins moved the Fund in new directions. He still sought his ideal university, one without credits or grades or even students. He determined, with the underwriting of the Fund, to establish his own Acropolis where a baker's dozen of thinkers would write, but more importantly discuss, the fundamental issues facing humanity. This, of course, became the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions at Santa Barabara. Amidst the storied opulence of the Center Hutchins and his academy sought to "Keep the Dialogue alive." As at Chicago, Hutchins could not escape the endless rounds of fund raising and internal dissent. The final, sad years of the Center that preceded Hutchins's death in 1977 should not detract from a career distinguished by a commitment to ideas. No agreement exists on the useful legacy of the Center, but the one criterion Hutchins would have applied is the controversy it evoked. By this measure it succeeded wonderfully.

II

The "boy wonder" (a sarcastic tag that Hutchins could never shake) took up his duties at the University on the brink of a national depression. But

the immediacy of that crisis did not deter him from fulminating against academia's grievous sins (as he saw them). The occasion for his major constructive statement on education came with the invitation to deliver the Storrs Lectures at Yale Law School in 1936. Published, these are The Higher Learning in America.

The book's rhetorical nature becomes quickly apparent. Hutchins was most effective as a speech maker, one of the educational world's most sought after throughout his presidential tenure. Commencement addresses, national radio talks, speeches to businessmen's luncheons and educational gatherings: he addressed hundreds of groups. These were the origin of almost all of his published writings and the source of his--and by extension the University of Chicago's--high visibility in the thirties and forties. Hutchins left a significant corpus of writings, but he could not bestow the presence of the man who first delivered them. The 6-foot 3-inch president, handsome, urbane, and possessed by his sharp wit, cut a figure reminiscent of the Hollywood screen's leading men. Schooled in the humor of Franklin P. Adams's "Conning Tower" column while at Yale, Hutchins would in fact have been comfortable among the wits at the Algonquin. His formal addresses and personal conversations were filled with clever insults, contrived for their shock value. Hutchins, a friend noted, had the tendency "to go out and poke the other guy in the puss and see what will happen."(10) In turn he was also disarmingly self-depreciating. His rhetorical style, aggressive, self-assured, and occasionally flip and hyperbolic, combined with his commanding physical presence charmed audiences. If any figure in the history of America education may be said to have possessed charisma it would be Robert Hutchins.

The major ideas incorporated in The Higher Learning in America were formed early in Hutchins's presidency. His University convocation address in 1933 spoke of the bewilderment of education, the central problem he would

speak to in his Yale lectures. Explaining the origins of his thought is less easy, though. While one can identify elements of his Yale training in his work--the well-honed argument of the debater encased in the vivid imagery of the orator--Hutchins's conversion from the empiricism of his law school days to the search for first principles that characterized his Chicago career defies easy explanation. Hutchins's clearest statement on his disillusionment with a functional approach to law came in another 1933 address: "The Autobiography of an Ex-law Student."(11) If Hutchins's description of his intellectual hegira is correct he was ripe for the influence of someone who could offer the promise of order. The person who appeared at Hutchins's law school office door one day in 1926, Mortimer Adler, would be that one.

Two people more different in background, appearance, and temperament than Adler and Hutchins would be hard to imagine. Yet the strong-willed Hutchins dated his "true" education from the beginning of their association during his Yale deanship. Adler's need for intellectual order was by his own confession compulsive. Somewhat of a rogue figure in American academic circles, Adler's career has centered about the quest for the Holy Grail of philosophical unity. He was part of the circle influenced by the remarkable John Erskine in his Columbia College General Honors Course after World War I. Together with Richard McKeon, Stringfellow Barr, and Scott Buchanan, Adler sought to define a new unity for all learning through a comprehensive study of the great thinkers of the Western tradition. In Adler, Hutchins found a companion and intellectual guide, the key figure in his transition to the neo-scholasticism of the 1930's. Adler, in turn, found an academic home (unfriendly though it was to the brash New Yorker) when Hutchins invited him to Chicago soon after assuming the presidency. If Robert Hutchins was the Absalom of the educational world, seeking to overthrow the enthroned order, Mortimer Adler was his Achitophel, whispering encouragement and advice.

The Higher Learning in America bespeaks Hutchins's educational ideals, battered but not defeated by his six contentious years astride the University of Chicago. As in all of Hutchins's writings the thesis of The Higher Learning in America is simple, direct, and stated as provocatively as possible. "The most striking fact about the higher learning in America," Hutchins begins, "is the confusion that besets it."(12) Qualities endemic to American society engender this confusion. First, money, "the mother's milk of education," exercises its beguiling power over educators, who have compromised their purpose to its pursuit. Second, a misplaced notion of democracy has diluted curricular standards and encouraged legislative meddling in the same. An erroneous belief in progress, finally, has supplanted traditional studies with a progressive curriculum that must be always be revised to stay abreast of new knowledge.

If an educational system mirrors the nature of society and that society is given to mercenary values, how can it escape contamination? Only, Hutchins believes, by having institutions firm against the tides of opinion. But in accomplishing this universities face their greatest dilemma: how to reconcile the search for truth as an end in itself with most students' goal of vocational preparation. Careerism breeds professional schools that replace a study of their discipline's principles with the trite and impermanent techniques of operation. Professors of medicine, economics, psychology, or law cease to speak to one another, separated by the self-imposed obsession with the particulars of their field. "Vocationalism leads, then, to triviality and isolation; it debases the course of study and the staff."(13)

Hutchins's offense at the implicit anti-intellectualism of an education devoted to practical training was hardly novel. An even stronger indictment of this system had in fact come a few years earlier, in 1930, when Abraham Flexner's Universities: American, English, German appeared, itself the product

of his 1928 Oxford lectures. In language that occasionally approached bombast Flexner berated universities for having "needlessly cheapened, vulgarized, and mechanized themselves." Flexner particularly took aim at the University of Chicago of the 1920's as an example of misguided education purveying such trivial programs as "costume design" and "psychology of advertizing and selling." "That the prestige of the University of Chicago should be used to bamboozle well-meaning but untrained persons with the notion that they can receive a high school or college education is scandalous." Hutchins owed a debt to Flexner's critique, even to the delight they both took in reciting the most trivial courses contained in any college catalogue (Hutchins, tactfully, avoiding his own). But the two men parted over their vision of the ideal university; Flexner sought not an intellectual community addressing common problems but a research community of scholars in the German tradition.(14) He thus offers less guidance than Hutchins for those of us seeking a path to the education of the general citizenry.

After setting out education's besetting temptations in his first two lectures Hutchins reveals his blueprint in the final two. At the heart of his program is his distinction between general education and "The Higher Learning." General education is that common body of learning students ought to pursue in college (or more properly, during the final two years of high school and the first two of college, at which time, Hutchins believed, the B.A. degree ought to be granted. This novel approach was in fact adopted in Hutchins's college for a few years in the 1930's and early 1940's.). Hutchins agrees with John Dewey that education should prepare students for action in life. But rather than turn schools into a practicum for life he believes that college learning should be pervasively intellectual. Not character training, social skills, or vocational preparation, but "the cultivation of the intellect" must form the bark and core of true education. The skills of a

clear, flexible mind will have greater utility in all fields than one harnassed to pedestrian facts and techniques. Science must, then, take a backseat to a vigorous curriculum of the liberal arts. These studies will consist of a close reading of Western culture's classics. Hutchins was fond of saying that education should be the same "at any time, in any place;" yet he tempers that universalism by acknowledging that we ought primarily to read the thinkers of our tradition, from Herodotus to William James. The medieval trivium of grammar, rhetoric, and logic, easily translates into the trivium for modern times, reading, writing, and reasoning--skills marking educated people today as surely as in Abelard's Paris.

Securely grounded in the elements of learning, the student then proceeds in his junior year to the university for his higher education. Swept away from Hutchins's ivy halls are the cluttered variety of departments and courses to choose from. Missing is the obsession with empirical data. Instead, one finds a simple division of the faculty into metaphysics, social science, and natural science. And in place of a learning without coherence or order students would discover a hierarchy of truths. This principle of unity is for Hutchins the essential element of the higher learning. Where theology unified the medieval university, Hutchins stated, our "faithless generation" must find the same end in metaphysics, the science of first principles. No matter the profession to which students ultimately aspire, their curriculum will be much the same: courses in metaphysics to begin, then proceeding to those in social and natural sciences. The mix will vary depending on their vocational goal, but all will graduate having thought seriously about "fundamental problems." What of professional schools, programs of vocational study, and scholars dedicated to the collection of data? Since these deal with transitory techniques or the mere cataloguing of data and not with the expounding of timeless truths they must be at the periphery of the university or even

beyond. Affiliated research institutes can continue their aggregation of facts; professional schools will likewise become either free standing or loosely affiliated to the university. Their mission of technical training must no longer subvert the university's more proper commitment to providing an intellectual framework of understanding.

Such is Robert Hutchins's vision of a reformed American education. His is, it hardly needs saying, an idiosyncratic one, but not one formed apart from the influence of other important education theorists. Most directly, of course, he came within the sphere of Adler, Buchanan, and the other advocates of the liberal arts movement.(15) Less direct than his contemporaries but always a hovering presence in Hutchins's work is the influence of John Henry Cardinal Newman's The Idea of a University. Newman framed the problem that had changed but a little eighty years later, to wit: On what basis does one construct a unified program of university study? Only, Newman responded through the integrative power of theology, which is "a condition of general knowledge." This Thomistic scheme of education that Newman championed overtly and Hutchins in a necessarily more veiled, secular idiom, gave a special place to Aristotle as "The oracle of nature and truth." "We cannot help, to a great extent, being Aristotelians . . . In many subject matters, to think correctly is to think like Aristotle." This happens to be Newman, but Hutchins would later appropriate the quote.(16) University education as "intellectual, not moral," knowledge as its own end, and the highest learning being general ideas rather than particulars: these retorts of Newman to educational utilitarians anticipated and surely shaped Hutchins's similar broadsides of the next century. Though Newman wrote in a more explicity religious age than did Hutchins, the acids of secularism were already dissolving theology's educational bond. Newman's early warning would give way to Hutchins's reargaurd action.

If in Cardinal Newman Hutchins found a compatible conservatism, in Thorstein Veblen he located an indigenous educational radicalism. Hutchins never said whether his borrowing of Veblen's title, The Higher Learning in America, signified an intellectual obligation, but there can be little doubt that he saw his book as a companion to Veblen's revolutionary manifesto. It should be remembered that the first Higher Learning was even more a University of Chicago product than the second. Veblen acknowledged that most of his observations for his 1907 book derived from the University under William Rainey Harper (who is left unnamed). In analysis and prescription the two books differ markedly. As always, Veblen is obsessed with the insidiousness of business values, in this case detracting from the university's disinterested pursuit of knowledge. Hutchins could never (at least in print) display such contempt for business or business schools as did Veblen; himself a "captain of erudition," Hutchins faced constraints that Veblen refused to feel. Also unlike Hutchins, Veblen's university was to be a place of research not instruction (an attitude which by most accounts he carried into the classroom). The prose of the two men, finally, could hardly be more different. Hutchins's rhetorically powerful essays, direct and transparent, have little in common with Veblen's detached, almost clinical prose. Both employ sarcasm regularly. But where Hutchins wears it on his sleeve, Veblen's suddenly flashes forth out of his abstruse and at times nearly impenetrable prose. His is social criticism disguised as case study. Very different books, then, but bound by their iconoclasm. Hutchins's version lacks the profundity of Veblen's insights into the social forces working on education, but he matches the dour Norseman's self-conscious dissent from the accepted canons of higher education. And though his alienation from American life was by no means as thorough as Veblen's (who was always an outsider), Hutchins perhaps displayed the greater courage in maintaining a position that brought

unrelenting criticism from the academic establishment.

III

Robert Hutchins could hardly have chosen a less congenial setting from which to sally forth on his mission of reform. The University of Chicago exemplified the American research university in the 1920's and 1930's. Nowhere else in the mainstream of higher education did empiricism find so severe an application. Not just in the traditional physical and biological sciences but more particularly in the social sciences, where Charles Merriam introduced quantitative methods to political science and Robert Park and Ernest Burgess had revolutionized the study of sociology. Even the Divinity School headed by Shailer Matthews championed an empirical theology. That the professors should now shelve their instruments and begin interlocution on first principles did not please the University dons. Chicago's philosophy department was especially nettled. With its interest in the social basis of thought, the "Chicago School," anchored in the writings of John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, and James H. Tufts, rejected both neo-Aristotelianism and its arch-proponent Mortimer Adler. Hutchins's fight with the department over appointments initiated him into the rough and tumble of administration.(17) Chicago faculty early became wary of their new prexy, and his pronouncement of 1936 only confirmed their suspicions of revolutionary intent. "Academic fights are so bitter," that wicked aphorism goes, "because so little is at stake." Not so here. Though cabals, intrigues, and petty spites abounded in the University's charged atmosphere through a decade and a half, a fight for the soul of higher education trancended such foibles.

The Higher Learning in America broke upon the public in the fall of 1936 as few educational works have. The fireworks on Chicago's South Side the preceding several years had built up national interest in Hutchins's culminating statement. It sold 8500 copies in three years--remarkable numbers

for its kind--and reached a vaster audience through serialization in the Saturday Evening Post. Reviews and features on Hutchins and his school proliferated in the latter 1930's, spreading his educational tenets to much of the literate public. College newspaper editors reportedly had a "field day" with the book, pro and con; the editor of the Daily Princetonian wrote Hutchins that his volume was the "text" for their editorial policies.(18) On his own campus, as might be expected, debate took on a greater immediacy. Professors could not after all simply dismiss the avowed intentions of their president to reconstruct his/their university.

Focus of faculty dissent fell on Harry Gideonse, a young Dutch-born economist. Outspoken and a prominent campus figure, Gideonse delivered a series of rebuttal lectures published in 1937 as The Higher Learning in a Democracy. His critique, the most thorough Hutchins's book received, contains the substance of most all subsequent arguments. Gideonse, like all of Hutchins's critics, accepted his criticisms of higher education. Uncertainty about goals and rampant vocationalism indeed plague the academy. But Hutchins's remedies are not only deficient or misled, they are positively dangerous. Why? Because of his appeal to an undefined metaphysics as the basis for a new unity. Who shall define these metaphysical principles, Gideonse asked, and will they be mandatory? Moreover, as an apostle of science Gideonse took offense at the priority given the wisdom of the ancients. Knowledge is dynamic and progressive, today's answers more certain than yesterday's. The confusion that Hutchins lamented was to Gideonse a normal element of learning. Hutchins's program would not simply stifle science, but would curtail democracy itself. "To crystallize truths into Truth and to substitute metaphysics for science is to arrest a process of intellectual growth that is the basis of the democratic process."(19)

What Gideonse intimated others shouted: The Higher Learning in Americ

extolled "authoritarianism." The term's Fascist implications were not missed by those of the decade. John Dewey in a famous exchange with Hutchins carried on in The Social Frontier judged that Hutchins's search for ultimate principles resembled the "distrust of freedom . . . that is now overrunning the world."(20) Others took up the theme. Reviewing a companion volume of Hutchins essays published in 1936, No Friendly Voice, Chicago philosophy professor Thomas V. Smith noted Hutchins's consummate style, "so singular as to be arresting," the "stuff of which great leaders are made," and no one, thought Smith, surpasses Hutchins in this quality--"unless perchance it be Mussolini." (21) Even Hutchins's mentor in law school, Charles E. Clark, to whom The Higher Learning in America was dedicated, warned of an authoritarian deadening of inquiry should a forced unity of principle be imposed.(22)

That Robert Hutchins, noted already in the 1930's as a voice of liberalism, should stand accused of authoritarian tendencies is no small paradox. Hutchins always believed that his reformed education would strengthen democracy through an inculcation of the principles upon which it is based. But his formalism ran against the grain of American thought. The relativism implicit in the scientific method came to dominate social thought and for a time in the 1920's intellectuals even questioned whether people possessed the rationality deemed essential for a democracy. Leading thinkers no longer based democracy on transcendent, immutable principles. It was left to John Dewey in the 1930's to reconcile relativism with democracy, a synthesis that commanded respect by the era's modernists and a renewed commitment to American values in the face of a Fascist threat. But Dewey's accomplishment also meant defining absolutist philosophy as intrinsically undemocratic. Hutchins thus found himself engaged not only in occasionally acrimonious exchanges with the grand old man of American philosophy but also coming down on the losing side of the debate about the nature of truth

itself.(23)

Other reviewers of The Higher Learning in America avoided such severe indictments even while distancing themselves from Hutchins's proposals. University of Wisconsin President Glenn Frank and New York University President Harry Woodburn Chase both scored Hutchins for seeking to revive a discredited nineteenth-century mental discipline philosophy of education. The rigors of logical training, they asserted, are no substitute for a curriculum based on contemporary problems and approaches. Writing in The American Scholar Chase questioned whether a single curriculum, especially one so intellectually demanding, could profit all undergraduates. And if, Chase continued, higher learning is confused, that confusion has a "vitality and a certain lusty vigor of youth."(24) Hutchins's search for unity also distressed Christian Gauss, who characterized the proposed curriculum as "one-sided, pedantic, uninteresting and fantastic in its paradoxical simplicity." Gauss, understandably, feared that an unrelenting intellectualism would exclude proper consideration of the humanities.(25) Reviewer Marvin McCord Lowes was similarly put off by Hutchins's "glorification of the intellect" and conversely by his disregard for moral training.(26) Hutchins's counterpart at Harvard, James B. Conant, did not review the book but gave his impressions in a personal letter. "I admire the way in which you wield your pen," he wrote, "but in this case I cannot refrain from expressing my hearty disapproval of almost all that you say." Conant admonished Hutchins to "throw your idea of a 'pervasive' philosophy into Lake Michigan."(27)

Hutchins did find a small core of supporters, however. Philosophical comrades Mortimer Adler and Richard McKeon rushed to his aid, offering counsel on rebuttal to Gideonse. Adler's frustration at what he deemed the perverse ignorance of Chicago faculty caused him to urge Hutchins to consider the presidency of City University of New York.(28) Hutchins also heard

encouragement from Walter Lippmann. "I have read nothing on universities which has interested me so much, or cleared up so many confusions," Lippmann wrote. "I am not flattering you when I say that it is as profound as it is obviously brilliant."(29) Lippmann's endorsement takes on special poignancy when one recalls that his own comprehensive statement of political philosophy of two decades later, The Public Philosophy (1955), would likewise appeal to a "natural law" and would similarly meet with a cool critical reception.

Predictably, the firmest support for The Higher Learning in America came from America's Catholic scholars. Hutchins's neo-scholasticism fitted nicely with the resurgence of Thomistic thought in the Catholic world (a leading proponent, Jacques Maritain, would in fact accept an appointment at the University of Chicago). The editor of The Modern Schoolman, a journal dedicated to scholasticism's revival, told Hutchins that "we feel a certain fellowship with men like yourself and Professor Adler."(30) But even Protestant journals commended Hutchins's message. Christian Century appreciated Hutchins's recognition of a disintegrating cultural order and "the idolatry of science." But echoing Catholic reviewers, it urged him to drop a jejune metaphysics in favor of an overtly theological, God-centered education.(31) These friends liked what they heard--but wanted more.

IV

For his part, Hutchins never defined to anyone's satisfaction what he meant by "metaphysics," though he spent a great deal of time speaking to this one issue all reviewers raised. He generally repeated that an age of unbelief required a philosophical unity rather than a theological one. But in at least one letter he hinted "that any metaphysics that is worth the name will lead to natural theology."(32) The man who wished to erase confusion from higher education left a large measure of it at the heart of his doctrine.

If Robert Hutchins could no more banish confusion from his own thought

than he could from universities generally, why pay him further attention? Neither then nor in later years did he exert a formative influence on American higher education. Though interest in general education picked up at the end of World War II, it would be Harvard's famous "Redbook" that provided the keynote. And in the most recent efflorescence of liberal arts emphasis, Hutchins and the Chicago years generally earn no more than an occasional footnote as a commendable early experiment. Have we, then, anything to learn from this book of a half-century past? Most certainly. The lessons come in part from what he had to say of value and how he said it, but just as importantly they reside in the resistence his ideas met.

Hutchins's failure (and he carried an acute sense of failure to the end of his life) to restructure higher education says as much about America as it does him. The classical curriculum he championed, to give an example, contains a profound and irreducible conservatism regarding the human condition. But most Americans see education as a tool for shaping the future--a future that will be different, better than the past. Our characteristic optimism makes us impatient with those who would restrict us to a narrow and retrospective course of study. Hutchins's tendency to absolutist positions also pitted him against the American grain. The John Calhouns, with their architectonically perfect systems, have been viewed as mischievous in their rigidity. In education as well as in politics our nation has gloried in compromise. The American university, as Laurence Veysey explained so brilliantly, emerged from a series of compromises. The "tendency to blend and reconcile" competing educational goals created institutions that sought several ends simultaneously. Hutchins's plan to bring order and singleness of purpose to a multifarious system could only find rejection. Harvard's 1945 report on General Education in a Free Society, by contrast, built on existing courses, a pragmatic arrangement that made it the influential model for other

colleges.(33)

The intense intellectualism of Hutchins's imagined university foundered on yet another national quality: a utilitarianism that pervades even the academy. Richard Hofstadter long ago defined the prevalent strain of anti-intellectualism in America. In education this has meant, as Frederick Rudolph observes, that certification of skills are valued above the acquisition of wisdom. The 1947 report of the President's Commission on Higher Education--the era's other major statement on the importance of education in a democracy--bespeaks a triumphant utilitarianism couched in the spread-eagle confidence that was America's at the end of the Second World War. Universities can accomplish all ends for all people. That students should bother with "'eternal' truths revealed in earlier ages" is inadvisable since it would be "likely to stifle creative imagination and intellectual daring."(34) Rather, in the finest Deweyite fashion, students should confront contemporary problems, whether it be community health or family relations.

The shrewdest comments on Hutchins's incompatibility with the American way came from Sidney Hook, himself nearer the center of American thought. In Education for Modern Man, one of our wisest books on higher education, Hook arraigns an exclusively classical curriculum for its blindness to present concerns and its implicit message that there are no genuine solutions to social problems. More crucially, Hook indicts Hutchins for failing the pragmatic test of means and ends: "True educational wisdom must be more than a counsel of perfection; its suggested reforms should use what is good in an inadequate situation to make the whole better. Otherwise it provides no leverage for action and runs into denunciation or fantasy."(35)

Hook is the fox to Hutchins's hedgehog. The former possesses a detached, analytical power congenial to the American experimentalist tradition. The latter knows one thing for sure--and will not retreat. Where Hutchins's

writings are expansive and hyperbolic, their sarcasm and seriousness often difficult to disentangle, Hook's are controlled and driven by a careful, compelling logic. One reads Hook on education and returns to Hutchins with a more critical eye. "Hutchins's aphorisms are like bombshells," astutely observed University of Rochester President Alan Valentine, "they startle, but their light may fade before the echoes of their sound."(36)

Yet even conceding all of this, The Higher Learning in America commends itself to us, in part because of the very qualities that have restrained its influence. Hutchins's call for a metaphysics of knowledge above all else violates the modern temper. One might agree that no such ground for unity exists in a pluralistic age. But to do so is to admit the intellectual poverty of a liberal culture increasingly reduced to mere science and a vague commitment to the Western tradition. Modern curricular reforms, such as Harvard's 1979 report, generally stress skills or modes of inquiry instead of an interpretive philosophy. The irony here is great: Hutchins, one of the eminent modern spokesmen of liberalism, also declaims liberalism's decline as a unifying principle in education. The tragedy of modern education is not just that we are no closer to an answer than we were fifty years ago but that most have stopped asking. The Higher Learning in America can be read as a useful reminder of our predicament if not as a prescription for its solution.

The book also reaffirms the centrality of teaching in the ecology of universities. University administrators and public relations officers dutifullly repeat the importance of undergraduate teaching. But by now everybody knows better. The rewards go elsewhere. Hutchins's concern was overwhelmingly with the university as a teaching institution; his passion was the education of the citizen. In this he shared Jacques Barzun's disdain for the "cult of the teacher." Subject matter should carry itself without need for an inspirational instructor. He dismissed the "nauseating" apothegm about

the ideal education being Mark Hopkins on one end of a log and a student on the other. Yet Hutchins's own career in the classroom indicated otherwise. The Great Books lived more because of his demanding and incisive questioning than because of their immediate appeal to eighteen-year olds. He developed a following--cultic is hardly too strong a word--that endures among Chicago alumni forty years later.

Leon Botstein tells us that The Higher Learning in America ought also to be taken seriously today for its insistence on the link between democracy and education.(37) This has of course long been a part of the national creed, at no time more pronounced than during the struggle with totalitarianism in the 1930's and 1940's. But at some point in the past two decades this message lost its urgency. Apart from applauding our equalitarian access to a college education, the three recent reports on higher education* display a striking apathy to its importance for democracy. Do we fail to speak of this link now because we take it for granted or because we no longer believe in it? Either way, Hutchins confronts us with the crucial nature of this relationship. His is a simple faith: democracy demands an educated, inquiring citizenship. Maybe our society now finds as little relevancy in that proposition as it does in the possibility of theological (or metaphysical) certainty. If we could recapture a lively sense of that relationship educators would be handed their rationale for a liberal arts curriculum.

Robert Hutchins also reminds us of the sine qua non of a university: its vitality. One can dismiss every tenet of the Hutchins creed and still have to admit that his university was perhaps the most exciting place of learning our country has known. Its energy was a product of his (and his colleagues) infectious enthusiasm for those twin elements of learning, dialogue and reflection. Hutchins always summed up his career as the attempt to construct an "intellectual community," a place where student and faculty discoursed on

questions fundamental to all disciplines. The antipathy of our specialized academia to this notion is profound, and we are tempted to dismiss the very terms as banal. But what is the intent of a liberal education if not to create a rational community of thinking people? A society given over to careerism and technology demands the imparting of skills from its colleges. Hutchins, however, calls us back to a primitive gospel. Where we pay lip service to the ideals of liberal education, he will accept no token offerings. Seeking to fulfill a prophetic calling, Hutchins admitted to being "depressed and incurable" much of the time over a society that could not ignore but still needed his advice.(32)

We still do not. And partially in consequence, our higher education still fails to adequately educate. "Treason," Jefferson implored "to crusade against ignorance."(33) Robert Hutchins carried out that commission with a dedication matched by few others. But though our society continues to honor its various messengers of educational reform, it can bring itself only haltingly--weighed down with doubts and other priorities--to seriously consider their message.

* To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education by William J. Bennett (National Endowment for the Humanities)

Involvement in Learning: Realizing the Potential of American Higher Education (National Institute of Education)

Integrity in the College Curriculum: A Report to the Academic Community (Association of American Colleges)

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1. James Grant Blair, "Youth at the Top," World's Work LIV (Feb. 1933):32
2. Told.; Robert Maynard Hutchins, "The Yale Law School in 1928," typescript in Hutchins Papers, Box 3, folder 22, U. of Chicago Special

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3. John Henry Schlegel, "American Legal Realism and Empirical Social Science: From the Yale Experience," Buffalo Law Review 28 (Summer, 1979):459-490.

4. Charles Gilkey, Memoranda of conversations on trip East during University of Chicago Presidential search, April 22, 1929, in Harold Swift Papers, box 27, file 4, University of Chicago Special Collections.

5. See Chauncey Samuel Boucher, The Chicago College Plan (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1935), and Faculty of the College of the University of Chicago, The Idea and Practice of General Education: An Account of the College of the University of Chicago by Present and Former Members of the Faculty (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1950).

6. Robert Lasch, "Two Intrepid Colleges," The Reporter (June, 21, 1949):32-33.

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10. Quoted in Reeves, Freedom and the Foundation, p. 11.

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18. Frank W. Lounsbury to Hutchins, Sept. 17, 1937, Hutchins Papers, box 42, file 3.

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20. John Dewey, "President Hutchins's Proposals to Remake Higher Education," The Social Frontier 3 (Jan. 1937):104.

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22. Charles A. Clark, "The Higher Learning in a Democracy," Ibid., 47 (April 1937):317-35.

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28. Mortimer Adler to Hutchins, undated [circa 1935], Hutchins Papers, Box 4, File 4.

29. Walter Lippmann to Hutchins, June 14, 1937, Hutchins Papers, Box 44, File [illegible].

30. [illegible] Tolerance to Hutchins, March 3, 1937, Hutchins Papers, Box [illegible], File 4.

31. "President Hutchins' Mistake," Christian Century 54 (April, 14, 1937):[illegible]; "A God-Centered Education," Ibid. 54 (April 21, 1937):564.

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